

□ Dems Rally Support for Anti-War Bill

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WASHINGTON -Up to a dozen Democrats might resist setting a deadline to end the war in Iraq, prompting House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to rally prominent party members to help widen the margin for a nail-biting vote.

Former Rep. Lee Hamilton, who co-chaired the Iraq Study Group, is expected to extend his support for the measure before the House votes on Thursday. Former Florida Sen. Bob Graham and President Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, backed Pelosi's proposal on Tuesday.

The bill "will clarify the U.S. role in Iraq and generate performance by the Iraqis that in all likelihood would otherwise be postponed," Graham wrote in a letter to Pelosi, D-Calif. "In doing so, the bill provides what is currently missing, a plan to redeploy our troops from a situation that cannot be improved by their continued presence."

The \$124 billion bill includes more than \$95.5 billion for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it would demand that troops come home before fall 2008 and possibly earlier if the Iraqi government does not meet certain benchmarks.

Pelosi's intense lobbying reflects the high stakes for a new speaker trying to prove that she can govern. With Democrats holding 233 seats and Republicans with 201, Democrats can afford only 15 "no" votes and still be assured of passing the legislation.

Members of the speaker's leadership team said they cannot guarantee that they have the votes to pass the bill and hoped they would not have to delay it.

"I'll say we are closer to the 218 today than we were yesterday, and we'll be closer to it tomorrow than we are today," House Majority Whip James Clyburn, D-S.C., said Tuesday after emerging from a caucus meeting.

Leadership hopes the endorsements will buoy support for a bill that some moderates say goes too far and liberals say does not go far enough. Pelosi received her first big political boost on Monday when the grass-roots anti-war group MoveOn.org extended its support.

The momentum continued Tuesday in a private meeting of party members, where Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., announced she wouldn't stand in the way. Strongly against the war and initially expected to vote against the bill because it wouldn't end the war immediately, Schakowsky said she planned to send a letter to her liberal colleagues urging them to drop their opposition.

The legislation "moves our position forward by focusing - not on if we will get out of Iraq - but when we will get out of Iraq," she said.

Debate was expected to continue Wednesday, when Brzezinski was scheduled to address members in a special caucus meeting.

Anti-war liberals, including California Reps. Barbara Lee, Lynn Woolsey, Maxine Waters and Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich, have said they will oppose the legislation because it would not end the war immediately.

"It's difficult to oppose Nancy Pelosi. She's a great leader and working wonders to get this passed, but some things I can't vote for," Rep. Pete Stark, D-Calif., told constituents at a town meeting last weekend.

Still, other members say they are undecided.

"I don't want to see this war go another day," said Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., who wants to end the war immediately. "For me, this is a decision I've got to make on my own."